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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to identify areas of stress which the black woman encounters, specify her strengths despite such stress, and delineate the educational implications for her children. Areas of stress identified and discussed include family life, economic conditions, and racism and sexism. Survival skills in the form of "mother wit," emotional strength, and pride are described as strengths possessed by the black woman despite the stress she encounters in her daily life. Based upon these stresses and strengths, educational implications for black children are described. Creative problem solving, motivation to aspire, and the doctrine of self help are discussed as ideals instilled in black children. It is shown that these positive attributes are often misunderstood, viewed as negative, and result in punitive action within the school setting. (Author/GC)

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STRENGTHS DESPITE STRESS:
PROFILE OF THE BLACK WOMAN IN AMERICA

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Over a decade ago, Stone wrote:

"There are two kinds of females in this country -- colored women and white ladies. Colored women are maids, cooks, taxi drivers, crossing guards, schoolteachers, welfare recipients, bar maids, and the only time they become ladies is when they are cleaning ladies."¹

This powerful statement pointedly summarized an observation of the perceived status assigned to America's black woman by the dominant society; prejudice, myths, stereotypes, distortions, and significant omissions have been largely responsible for perpetuating such an image. Although the black female, in general, has been little understood by society, the black mother, in particular, has been even less understood by one of society's most influential institutions -- the school.

Because "motherhood" is one of America's most cherished institutions, the quality of "the mothering experience" has been considered of paramount importance. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the expectation of the nation's schools. But just as some children enter school more ready than others, some mothers are more able than others to prepare their children for school entry. The deciding factors are the societal and economic advantages to which mothers have been exposed.

Since the literature regarding the black woman in America is generally disparaging -- focusing on her perceived weaknesses, it is the purpose of this paper to examine the areas of stress that the black woman encounters; specify her strengths despite stress; and then, based upon that information, delineate the educational implications for her children.

A History of Stress

Family Life

The stressful circumstances that have prevailed historically in the black family, have caused the black woman to have a unique set of problems foisted upon her. Beginning with the institution of slavery in America, the security, order, and high esteem that she had known in Africa was terminated and she found herself relegated to a lowly, subservient position.² Such a sudden and tragic loss of status was her first major problem. More painful experiences followed and became her lot in life; namely, frantically pleading that family members not be separated; witnessing the humiliating emasculation of her husband and sons; attempting to fight off the masters who inevitably raped her or her daughters; and teaching her children to acquiesce to whites.

Many of the racial problems that exist today in subtle, covert forms are vestiges of the racism that occurred during slavery. The sharing of pain continues in the black family as the black woman continues to see her husband emasculated in less obvious ways, e.g., ignored, under paid, last hired -- first fired, verbally discouraged, etc. Her children continue to be denigrated daily, and her own image is still distorted and belittled.

Smith, et. al. points out, in regard to these matters, that the poor black woman must share her partner's defeat and emotional pain -- an especially painful circumstance because his failure is not due to his lack of effort or ability, but is a consequence of the lack of opportunity. In addition to sharing her husband's burden,

the black woman must be concerned with the vulnerability of her children and undertake then, the difficult task of teaching them both the pride and "hazards" of being black in America.³

In regard to her own being, the black woman continually fights to dispel two mythical images imposed upon her: the domineering matriach and the "fast/loose" woman. Both images are rooted in slavery and result from the treatment of both black males and females. Because of the emasculation of black males, a dominance pattern for females emerged. However, this was a response to survival in a white society, not because either black males or females willed it to be. Thus, black families appeared to be organized along matriarchal lines when in fact the ability of the black woman to assume a variety of roles was then, and is now, a function of, and necessary for, survival.

The "fast/loose" woman, a myth that labels the black woman as sexually promiscuous, has similarly resulted from the emasculation of black males, for they could not offer their families the security of protection. Thus, the black man's wife and daughter(s) were sexually exploited by white males, and the stereotype that emerged plagues the black woman yet today.

Economic Circumstances

The economic plight of the black woman has been a constant source of stress. Ladner indicates that the vast majority of black women have spent or will spend some portion of their life in poverty.⁴ Unlike her white counterpart, the black woman has been

forced to work. Yet she has not been able to prosper.

Two societal perceptions of the black woman have placed her in a negative position economically. First, because she is a woman, white society has considered her more docile and thus, less of a threat than a black man.⁵ Second, because she is both black and female, she has been assigned to jobs having the least earning power and the lowest status.⁶

Thus, while the first perception has often resulted in the black woman being able to find work, even though the black man could not, the second perception has caused her to receive such meager wages that her family has barely been able to survive. Commenting on the economic problems of blacks, Lerner notes, "... one can say quite definitely that white society has economically pitted black women against black men."⁷

Such economic conflict between black men and black women has been experienced not only by the poor black woman, but by the professional black woman as well. Negative social consequences seem to attend their monetary "rewards." While loneliness on the job and lack of promotion are cited as two areas of stress for the professional black woman, Smith, et. al. suggest that the most obvious point of stress is the strain that a black woman's success may place on her relationship with black men.⁸ Although more research is needed in this area, it appears that a number of black professional women perceive that black men in their work settings avoid them. The implications of such a perception, then, are that the black woman who is fearful that she must opt either for a profession or a man, may avoid entering the profession.

One further area of economic stress that the black woman in the lower socioeconomic strata may face is being victimized by the degradation of the welfare system. Her reliance upon a substandard income, frequent debasement and demoralization, and inability to help herself has placed the black woman under severe stress. Despite this stress, many black women choose to work for poverty level wages rather than to subject themselves and their families to the humiliation that generally attends welfare aid.

Other Areas of Stress

In addition to the stresses that have already been discussed, two others merit mention. First, the problems that accompany racism and sexism have been partially responsible for many black women rearing their children in single-parent homes. Much of the sociological literature, particularly that on black families, describes such homes in disparaging terms. It is important to note that investigations have found many one-parent families that function better than two-parent families.⁹

Second, while some black women have become torn between the contemporary struggle over women's rights and the historical struggle over civil rights, black women generally have been more concerned with the struggle against, and stresses that result from, racism.

Lerner asserts:

... it appears from the record that most black women see race discrimination as a much more serious problem than sex discrimination. Black women, speaking with many voices, have been near unanimous in their insistence that their own emancipation cannot be separated from that of their men. Their liberation depends on that of the race

and the improvement of the life of the black community. Their main concern is with their families and their children.¹⁰

The conspicuous absence of significant numbers of black women presently in the women's movement would seem to support Lerner's observation.

In sum, the black woman has survived and endured many stresses. Over a decade ago, Murray's statistical profile based on census data, indicated that the black woman in America "... has a harder time finding a mate, remains single more often, bears more children, is in the labor market longer, has less education, earns less, is widowed earlier, and carries a heavier economic burden as a family head than her white sister."¹¹ Her plight remains basically unchanged today.

Strengths of the Black Woman

The black woman in America has been measured by two different yardsticks -- one white, one black -- and has been respected according to the yardstick being used. Historically, although whites almost totally disregard her importance, she has been held in high esteem within the black family, the black community, and the black race. For black people, unlike the white majority, know and understand what it means to be black in America.

In order to survive -- physically, emotionally, economically, and psychologically -- in a hostile society, the black woman has had to possess inordinate strengths. Those which she has modeled repeatedly have been "survival" skills in the form of "mother wit," emotional strength and pride. Although they have gone largely un-

noticed by the dominant society, such skills have enabled her to love in the face of hate, to exercise courage in the face of fear, and to hope in the face of futility and frustration. Each of her strengths will be examined herein.

"Mother Wit"

In the absence of formal education -- or having only limited education -- the intelligent behavior of the black woman has of times been expressed through her "mother wit." Holt asserts that the true test of intelligence is not how much we know how to do, but how we behave when we don't know what to do.¹² Given the stressful circumstances under which the black woman lives daily, her "mother wit" lends credibility to Holt's definition of intelligence.

For example, during slavery, many black women who were uneducated by design -- led parties of slaves to freedom on the underground railroad as they "read" the map of the celestial skies. Again, during slavery, "mother wit" was used in determining how to convey coded messages to slaves through proverbs, stories, and music. The ability of the black woman to teach her children to hang their heads in deference to whites, but never in shame, is still another example of the use of "mother wit."

The black woman has used this strength to instill in her family a philosophy of life that has been their source of survival. It has been particularly beneficial in relation to the special problem that she has in rearing her children as blacks in America. Because they are the targets of racial discrimination, the black woman must

teach her children to love themselves even though denigrated by the larger society. Moreover, she must teach her children to accept and respect those who are unwilling to accept or respect them. Finally, she must teach her children to constantly set a good example, for the entire race might be judged by their behavior. Such a triple burden is a monstrous one for children to shoulder, and nothing short of "mother wit" can be used to teach them how to accept that burden.

Emotional Strength

While many black mothers do not have the "quality" of experiences conducive to preparing their children to enter school, their experiences do qualify them to prepare their children to deal with the harsh realities of life. It is in this area -- dealing with the harsh realities of life -- that the black woman's emotional strength has emerged.

In addition to the emotional strength that it takes to bear the endless painful experiences of each family member, the black woman has had to call upon the same strength to teach her children to aspire to unseen and only hoped for rewards. In the absence of significant numbers of role models, the black woman has been able to accomplish the arduous task of instilling high levels of aspiration in her children. While there are increasing numbers of blacks who are exemplary models for black youth, the task of teaching children to follow in their footsteps may remain difficult if such models have not come from a background similar to that of the children. In other words, in order to become a "significant other" in the life of a poor black child, the model frequently must have been reared in the same way.

The emotional strength of the black woman has also provided the stamina that allowed her to endure when her physical strength had been depleted. Emotional strength had to provide her with the stamina that physical strength alone could not do. Black women have traditionally been disproportionately represented in the ranks of those employed as domestics. It is rare, indeed, that a black of any age, male or female, north or south, east or west, has not been closely associated with a black female domestic. The malnourished, wall washing, floor scrubbing, carpet beating, washing and ironing, meal cooking, baby feeding and diapering, window washing, bus riding female domestic is an all too familiar figure to America's black community. Yet despite her fatigue, she has always seemed to hold a store of physical and emotional strength in reserve for her own family.

The black woman has been forced into the labor market to help provide the double income so necessary for survival. Too frequently, the black woman has had to be the sole support of a household when her husband has been laid off or forced to absent himself from the home. In homes where fathers are present but unemployed, the black woman's role has been one of providing financial support for the family, while attempting not to appear as head of the household. This condition, of course, places additional stress on the relationship between husband and wife. For while she is the breadwinner; she must not perceive herself as dominant over her husband. Rather, she must give him emotional support to convince or remind him of his worth and importance to the family, despite his being devalued by the larger society.

In addition, the black mother has an equally difficult task -- nurturing/consoling her children. She must teach them not to be bitter in a bitter, hostile environment. Rather, they must learn to accept and take pride in the challenge of being black. Her special emotional strength permits this special kind of nurturing/consoling.

Pride

The pride that the black woman is able to instill in her children is that which she learned from her mother and grandmother. Pride has been a part of her history and was exemplified in the "doctrine of self-help," a doctrine of the black women's early secret and benevolent societies. This lesson taught blacks to depend upon each other, to help their race, to share, care, and cooperate.

Just as pride was demonstrated collectively in black women's organizations, it has been demonstrated individually as well in the behaviors of many black women throughout history. Prime among them is Rosa Parks whose insurmountable, indomitable pride precipitated the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's.

Such pride has been necessary to enable the black woman to have the accompanying dignity and respect to offset the myths and stereotypes that have been used to denigrate her.

Moreover, the strength of the black woman's pride has been manifested in her beauty -- both inner and physical. Such inner beauty lies in her ability to triumph over adversity in the diverse ways described earlier. Her physical beauty has been publicly

recognized in the last several years and reflects the beauty of her African heritage in terms of hair styles, attire, and stately carriage.

Educational Implications for the Black Woman's Children

In a discussion of the need for young black social scientists to clarify the nature of the realities of black family functioning --so grossly misinterpreted by white social scientists--Billingsley suggests that a new approach, a creative analysis, may provide valuable insights. He points out that such an approach might help to explain, for example: 1) how black children are taught by families whom the larger society has almost deserted, to be loving human beings and to have faith in the future; 2) how so many black youth stay out of jail; and 3) how so many black families manage to be self-supporting.¹³

These writers suggest that the black woman's strengths -- "mother wit," emotional strength and pride -- are an important part of that explanation and are indeed deserving of a new, creative analysis. Such an analysis could be of great value to educators of black youth. For perceiving the black woman in terms of her strengths allows educators to learn from her -- to tap previously untapped sources of information and to incorporate new knowledge into their curriculum and instructional designs. Illustrative examples follow.

Through her "mother wit," her natural intelligence, the black woman continually models creative problem-solving skills for her children. In turn, her children learn to utilize these skills.

Because educators generally function from a monocultural mainstream perspective, they do not discern nor understand how black children analyze situations or solve problems. Given a test, black students may give the "wrong" answers for the "right" reasons. Educators who use only test keys to score tests cannot determine why students respond the way that they do. If they were to ask students to explain their "wrong" answers, educators could gain valuable information about the creative problem solving skills of these youngsters who have learned to function very practically and realistically.

Ryan makes this point clear in his insightful analysis of testing situations for lower socioeconomic youth.¹⁴ (Since a disproportionate number of blacks comprise the lower socioeconomic class, this example has implications for the problem solving skills of black students.) Ryan's example is a classification test item and the task is to tell how a policeman, doctor, farmer, and sailor are alike. The middle class child would respond they they are all people or men. However, the child in question may suggest that they all like each other or the doctor helps the other men. He/she may ask him/herself what these four men do to or feel towards each other. Would they help, harm, like, or hurt each other?

Since middle class children tend to relate words to words and lower class children tend to relate words to actions, the middle class child's response would be scored as correct, while the lower class child's answer would be scored as incorrect. Thus, educators must learn to question students' responses. They may then realize that although they assume the child's response is incorrect because he/she doesn't know a "specific," (word-to-word relationship) the

child in fact has answered correctly -- within his/her frame of reference -- because he/she knows something "else" (word-action relationships).

Children oriented toward physical and emotional survival solve "real life" problems creatively and if their reasoning seems irrelevant to the school situation, Ryan asks, "... how relevant is the school situation to life?"¹⁵

Just as the black woman's "mother wit" has provided her children with creative problem solving skills, her emotional strength has provided them with motivation to aspire. Since educators are involved in a never ending search to motivate students, it would seem beneficial for them to learn about how the black woman motivates her children to be achievement oriented despite adverse circumstances.

Such an analysis might then lead educators to examine who mothers view as mentors in the black child's life, what types of influences in the out-of-school setting give positive direction to black youth, and how "significant others" assist in the motivation process.

Finally, the black woman's pride has enabled her to teach her children the doctrine of self-help. In the absence of societal assurances for financial, emotional, psychological and physical support services, the black woman teaches her children early in their lives to be self-reliant, to care, to share, to cooperate, to protect -- and if necessary -- to physically defend family members.

However, these traits which are viewed as admirable and are

rewarded within the family, are frequently misunderstood, viewed as negative and result in punitive action within the school setting.

Sharing, for example, may result in a child "helping" him/herself to a pencil which is not "in use" even though the pencil belongs to someone else. Educators tend to regard this "borrowing" as lack of respect for other people's property.

Cooperation may be manifested in what the school views as cheating, when these children freely "share" their test questions and answers with classmates.

Finally, self-reliance and physical defense of family members very often result in a most frequent occurrence among black children -- fighting.

While the writers do not condone unrestrained "borrowing," "sharing," or "defending," it is necessary that educators understand the intent surrounding these behaviors. Without such understandings, educators will be unable to build upon and channel these behaviors in the positive directions intended by black families. Peer-tutoring; using class monitors to help handicapped students; implementing a "buddy" system to assist newcomers to the classroom or school; pooling resources (e.g., a common supply of pencils, crayons, etc. contributed by the children) are a few illustrative examples of such classroom applications.

Pride instilled in black children by their mothers may be manifested in yet another misunderstood way. Children who have encountered negative reinforcement from teachers and/or frequent failure, often hesitate to respond to questions though they may know the answers. In addition, they may avoid asking questions

when unsure of directions or procedures. Pride does not allow them to risk further humiliation. While such reactions would generally occur with any child, the chances of poor and/or black youth being so affected are more likely, and potentially more damaging.

Epilogue

Traditionally, the literature and research on the black family have been viewed through microscopic rather than telescopic lenses -- searching for flaws and weaknesses rather than for quality and strengths. The tragic results have been a flood of erroneous information.

If education is preparation for a meaningful life in the "real world," it is incumbent upon educators to actively pursue relevant, accurate, objective information about the "real world" of black Americans. For education procedures, devoid of this vital knowledge can only mean continued miseducation and undereducation of black youth. For the black woman, this continued injustice to her children seems a stress that she should no longer be asked to bear.

FOOTNOTES

¹Louise D. Stone, citation from "What It's Like to be a Colored Woman," Washington Post, November 13, 1966. In Gerda Lerner, ed., Black Women in White America, A Documentary History, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 217.

²Lerone Bennett, Jr., "No Crystal Stair: The Black Woman in History," Ebony, August, 1977, pp. 164-165.

³William D. Smith, Ann K. Burlew, Myrtis H. Mosley, and W. Monty Whitney, Minority Issues in Mental Health, (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 33-35.

⁴Joyce Ladner, "The Black Woman Today," Ebony, August, 1977, p. 36.

⁵Gerda Lerner, ed., Black Women in White America, A Documentary History, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. xxiii.

⁶Shirla R. McClain, and Norma L. Spencer, Racism and Sexism in America: The Black Woman's Dilemma, p. 13. Paper presented to the Sixth Annual Conference of the National Association for Interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies. The University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, LaCrosse Wisconsin, April, 1978.

⁷Lerner, Black Women, p. xxiv.

⁸Smith, et. al. Minority Issues, pp. 30-32.

⁹Robert B. Hill, The Strengths of Black Families, (New York: Emerson Hall Publishers, 1972), p. 22.

¹⁰Lerner, Black Women, p. 563.

¹¹Pauli Murray, "Jim Crow and Jane Crow," in Lerner, Black Women, p. 597.

¹²John Holt, "Education for Failure," In William F. O'Neil, ed., Selected Education Heresies, (Glenville, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969), p. 167.

¹³Robert B. Hill, The Strengths of Black Families, (Washington, D.C.: National Urban League, 1972), pp. xiv-xv.

¹⁴William Ryan, Blaming the Victim, revised ed., (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 43.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 44.